

## Exploring Action Tendencies

### Coping

 Exercise

 20 min

 Client

 No

Many current models of emotions state that emotions are associated with urges to act in particular ways, urges that have been referred to as specific action tendencies (Frijda, 1986; Frijda, Kuipers, & Schure, 1989; Keltner, & Gross, 1999). For example, anger can create the urge to attack, fear the urge to avoid or escape, and disgust the urge to expel, among others. It is important to note that action tendencies depend on an individual's situation (Barrett, 2006). Fear, for instance, may create the urge to flee but also the urge to take the car and race to the hospital after hearing that a friend had an accident. Likewise, anger may result in a strong urge to shout, but it may also create the desire to turn away silently. Although people do not necessarily act upon these urges, ideas about possible courses of action become clearer when these specific urges are present. When people follow these urges, before consciously having decided to do so, we speak of impulsive behavior. In these cases, the behavior is the immediate result of the emotion, not that of the deliberate choice of the individual (Strack & Deutsch, 2004). Impulsive behavior can be regarded as opposite to autonomous, self-regulated behavior in which the individual consciously makes choices and takes responsibility for his or her actions.

According to Fredrickson (1998), positive emotions differ from negative emotions in terms of the action tendencies they produce. She argued that positive emotions are less prescriptive compared to negative emotions in guiding particular actions. Positive emotions are suggested to broaden a person's momentary thought-action repertoire. Experiences of positive emotions prompt individuals to discard automatic (everyday) behavioral scripts and to pursue novel, creative, and often unscripted paths of thought and action. In other words, positive emotions create more room for choice and introduce an action tendency to explore new options. This broadening function of positive emotions has been found to have important consequences for well-being. Through the exploration of new ideas or actions, the person builds individual skills and resources, which could be either physical, social, and/or intellectual. These become a resource center that can be accessed later to assist in coping with an awkward situation, leading to greater resilience. Thus, over time, positive emotions can promote growth, both in terms of positive experiences as well as resilience.

This experiential tool was developed to increase clients' awareness of action tendencies that result from both positive and negative emotions.



### Author

This tool was created by Hugo Alberts (Ph.D.) and Lucinda Poole (Psy.D.).



## Goal

The goal of this tool is to increase awareness of action tendencies that result from both positive and negative emotions.



## Advice

- Clients who are completing the exercise for the first time should recall scenarios that are only moderately distressing (i.e., a 5 or 6 out of 10 on their stress scale). As clients become familiar with the technique, they might explore more challenging scenarios.
- If your client struggles to recall a recent positive experience, take some time to gently explore recent events until he or she finds something to use. Clients with depression or anxiety may have trouble attending to and recalling pleasant experiences, but it is unlikely that they have not experienced anything positive in the past, say, month.
- This tool is particularly helpful for clients who tend to be impulsive, as it promotes awareness of the urges that are created by emotional experience and creates space between the experience and the reaction that follows.



## References

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# Exploring Action Tendencies

## Instructions

### Part 1: Action tendencies resulting from negative emotions

This visualization exercise invites you to tune in to how you respond to emotions.

1. To begin, gently close your eyes and recall a recent time when you experienced a problematic emotion ... Maybe you were nervous about giving a presentation, missed an important deadline, or had an argument with a friend ... [20 secs]
2. As best you can, put yourself back into this challenging moment in time. Picture where you are ... who you are with, if anyone ... and what you are doing ... [30 secs]
3. Picture yourself precisely as you are in this challenging moment ... [20 secs]
4. Now, notice any feelings or emotions that are connected to this difficulty ... Take the strongest feeling or emotion, and notice where it seems to be experienced in your body ... [20 secs]
5. If you can, give this feeling or emotion a name, for example, anxiety, stress, guilt, shame ... [20 secs]
6. Now, notice what you want to do right now in response to this feeling or emotion. Disregard what you did at the time and stay in this imagined moment. Is there an urge to act in a particular way? Is there a sense of wanting to run away, to escape? Or is there a sense of wanting to stay here in this situation? [30 secs]
7. Now, let this moment go. Let go of the difficulty and associated feelings and emotions, and when you are ready, gently open your eyes.

Debrief:

- How was this experience for you? What did you notice?
- What did you want to do in response to this challenging experience? What was the action tendency?

### Part 2: Action tendencies resulting from positive emotions

1. Gently close your eyes again and recall a recent time when you experienced a positive emotion ... Maybe you reached a milestone at work, spent time with a loved one, or cooked something new and delicious for your friends ... [20 secs]
2. As best you can, put yourself back into this pleasant moment in time. Picture where you are ... who you are with, if anyone, ... and what you are doing ... [30 secs]
3. Picture yourself precisely as you are at this moment ... [20 secs]



4. Now, notice any feelings or emotions that are connected to this experience ... Take the strongest feeling or emotion, and notice where it seems to be experienced in your body ... [20 secs]
5. If you can, give this feeling or emotion a name, for example, joy, pride, happiness ... [20 secs]
6. Now, notice what you want to do right now in response to this feeling or emotion. Disregard what you did at the time and stay in this imagined moment. Is there an urge to act in a particular way? Is there a sense of wanting to run away, to escape? Or is there a sense of wanting to stay here in this situation? [30 secs]
7. Now let this moment go ... and come back into the room. When you are ready, gently open your eyes.

Debrief:

- How was this experience for you? What did you notice?
- What did you want to do in response to this positive experience? What was the action tendency? How did this differ from the first scenario?